



March 30, 2021

Honorable Senator Click Bishop
Co-chair, Senate Finance Committee
State Capitol Room 516
Juneau AK, 99801

Honorable Senator Bert Stedman
Co-chair, Senate Finance Committee
State Capitol Room 518
Juneau AK 99801

Re: Providence Alaska Supports HB 76: EXTENDING COVID 19 DISASTER EMERGENCY

Dear Senators Bishop and Stedman:

Providence Health & Services Alaska has set the standard for modern health care in Alaska for more than 100 years. Today, we remain the state's largest health care system and private employer, with nearly 5,000 caregivers across Alaska.

It was roughly one year ago, the first COVID-19 patient in the United States was treated at a Providence hospital in Washington. Providence caregivers have worked tirelessly to care for our families, friends, neighbors, and communities during this once-in-a-generation pandemic. As we see promising rates of vaccinations in Alaska, we can finally look toward positive days ahead. However, we cannot lose sight of the policies that will take us there.

The COVID-19 response has required the health care community to act nimbly and creatively while delivering care and protecting our most vulnerable patients. The state and federal government acted swiftly during the beginning months of the COVID-19 pandemic to provide hospitals and the health care community with tools necessary to deliver care and save lives, through legislation and a series of waivers and flexibilities.

As examples: we were able to adapt our physical environments, to include modifying our ventilation systems in the emergency department and creating negative pressure rooms to protect patients and caregivers; we partnered on alternative care sites and drive-through testing; examined our supply chain processes and partnered with Alaska businesses to ensure adequate PPE; we were able to modify our long-term care facilities and implement policies to protect our most vulnerable patients; we rapidly stood up a home monitoring program to safely monitor symptomatic patients at home, thereby augmenting critical capacity, reducing additional potential exposures, and the need for hospitalizations; and met the increased behavioral health needs of Alaskans through our ability to prescribe mental health and substance use disorder treatment by telehealth.

These flexibilities not only impact our COVID response, but access to care. There are also many Alaskans who are facing serious illnesses that require complex care teams and treatment plans, even before COVID. These Alaskans may have their local team augmented by out-of-state providers with specialties not offered in the state. This includes some cancer therapies, traumatic brain injuries, pediatric subspecialties and more. Because of travel restrictions, these patients are unable to travel for

appointments but were able to maintain their level of care through telehealth with their out-of-state providers. Telehealth provides the link between medically fragile Alaskans and their existing care teams during this public health emergency.

After the expiration of the public health emergency, we have been faced with the increased uncertainty and stress of interpreting this patchwork of flexibilities and regulations, while trying to minimize patient impacts. The abrupt ending of the disaster declaration has shifted the risk of interpreting the network of flexibilities and changes on the hospitals and providers, in real-time. Having a state disaster declaration that mirrored the federal disaster declaration provided the regulatory and legal certainty that allowed our teams to modify operations. We are committed to providing high-quality care and are working to minimize patient impacts as much as possible, but it has introduced significant uncertainty during an already exhausting and unprecedented time.

Unfortunately, ending the state's public health emergency disaster declaration does nothing to end the actual pandemic. In fact, local governments, businesses, non-profits, and the health care community have testified that the declaration is necessary to support Alaska's public health and economic recovery. We support the extension of the public health emergency disaster declaration and appreciate the Senate Finance Committee's work.

Thank you for your service to the state.

Sincerely,

A handwritten signature in black ink, appearing to read 'P. Simmons', with a long, sweeping horizontal line extending to the right.

Preston M. Simmons, DSc. FACHE
Chief Executive
Providence Health & Services Alaska